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ABSTRACT

In large and small countries alike, adult educators can no longer be content with educating adults as though they live in a vacuum but must instead become international adult educators to some extent. This is not to say that adult educators must teach an international subject every day. What it does mean is that they must make international understanding the perimeter or frame of reference for all their professional work. International adult educators live very consciously in the world, not only in their own cities or countries, and they try to see their own countries in a world context and be aware of their own national shortcomings. This in turn brings a perspective into their classrooms that opens the minds of adults to see themselves as responsible actors on the stage of the entire planet. The rapid growth of the International Council for Adult Education is proof that adult educators all over the world have a need and an interest in knowing each other and working together in a shared vision of the role of adult education in enhancing the quality of life on a global scale. As the council's founder, Dr. Roby Kidd was aware that the vast differences between adult education in industrialized and developing nations demand more than comparison of programs in different areas. What is really needed is a commitment among adult educators to mutual understanding and the sharing of personal insights to help others solve their problems. George Aker, Helena Kekkonen, and Adolfo Perez Esquivel are other prominent internationalists in the field of adult education. They have understood the need for and worked for international cooperation in the field of adult education despite the many political, cultural, and religious differences that sometimes make cooperative efforts difficult to develop. (MN)

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EMBRACING THE OBVIOUS

International Night
National Adult Education Conference
Washington, D.C., 21 October 1987

Beverly Benner Cassara

Ladies and gentlemen, it gives me the greatest pleasure to welcome you here this evening to this important internaional event. As adult educators representing a good many countries we are here for the very important purpose which I have called "embracing the obvious." For, to us, gathered here together, it is obvious that the quality of life on this small planet Earth can only be secured and enhanced through the good efforts of all the people who live on it, but we all need more information, more knowledge and more wisdom. And that is the purpose of adult education--to provide opportunities for gaining information, knowledge and wisdom--and not only in developing countries, but in every country and I speak especially for my own country.

It is certainly no overstatement to say that we cannot wait for today's children to grow up to be the saviours of the future. Therefore, I repeat that we are here to embrace the obvious--the obvious conclusion that it is the adults of today who determine to a great extent the future of the planet. We have a heavy responsibility to do everything in our power as adult educators to help adults everywhere empower themselves with the information, knowledge and wisdom that is required to function effectively in this increasingly sophisticated and interdependent world. And we must do this in a spirit of humility and with sincere respect for human dignity. This may sound like an awesome and even

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overwhelming responsibility, but I ask you, dear friends, is there any other way to go except to bury our heads in the sand like ostriches?

Let me mention a few of the woes of this world, just to spell out a bit the poignancy that must affect us all as we consider the conditions of life in the world today. We are told that at least forty of our 160 countries are in a state of war. Half the population of the world suffers some form of physical deprivation--lack of food, lack of clean water, lack of knowledge about and facilities for the dispensing of modern medicine. Racism and political oppression are rampant. The world economy is a giant we do not understand and do not know how to control. Unemployment is a monster. Some countries, worried about educating too many people, for whom jobs will not be available, are cutting back educational opportunities, both for general education and professional education--even for medical doctors who are desperately needed by half of the world. Is employment in one's own country, then, the only reason for education? And what about polution? It is affecting the land, air and sea of the whole world in a steady and unremitting pace. Acid rain is uncontrolled. Fish from many areas of the seas are not safe to eat. We are filling the earth with nuclear waste that will ostensibly never become harmless. The ozone layer is thinning, exposing us to new dangers. We do not know if we are creating a nuclear winter or an ozone summer. These are only some of our problems. Now we must ask, what is our responsibility as adult educators--adult educators in all countries, large or small. Can we content ourselves with teaching adults as though we live in a

vacuum? If our mission is to enhance the quality of life--and what else can it be?--we must see ourselves as actors on the world stage.

What is international adult education, who is an international adult educator and what does that person do? I would presume to say that perhaps everyone in this room tonight is an international adult educator, at least for this evening. The international adult educator is the person who makes international understanding the perimeter, the frame of reference for all one's professional work. This is not to say, for instance, that one would, of necessity, be teaching a particular international subject everyday. What it does mean is that we endeavor to understand international issues beyond what we see of the world news on television. It means that we endeavor, in whatever small way, to get to know persons from other countries and to help them understand us, as we learn to understand and appreciate them. It means that we try to see our own countries in a world context and to be aware of our own national shortcomings. I think that the international adult educator lives very consciously in the world, and not only in his own city or country. This then brings to any classroom a perspective that opens the minds of adults to see themselves as responsible actors on the stage of the earth. It certainly is not to say that particular political, social or religious dogma should be forced on adult learners. If it seems that there is a fine line between education and ideology or propaganda, well, then we have to take a chance. Life cannot be lived in a moral vacuum. The problem

of academic freedom will never be solved once and for all, as is evidenced in my own country by the number of cases related to academic freedom that continue to come before the courts, even our Supreme Court. We can only try to be fair and as objective as possible and believe in the willingness of informed adults to also try to be fair. In any case, ideally, adults should always be in the position to choose what they will learn.

The growing focus on things international in the adult education movement is not a temporary aberration, it is definitely the wave of the future. The rapid growth of the International Council for Adult Education is proof that adult educators all over the world have a need and an interest to know each other and to work with each other in a shared vision of the role of adult education in enhancing the quality of life on this earth. I am happy to say that you will have an opportunity in the plenary session tomorrow morning to hear more about the International Council for Adult Education when the Secretary General of that organization, Dr. Budd Hall, will moderate a panel of adult educators from the various regions of the world. You will hear their concerns about literacy, women in development, primary health care, participatory research, worker education and much more. And you will be impressed to see how each effort of the Council grows directly out of grass roots projects in the various areas, which means that the work of the council is based on the participation of local persons coming together through a network kind of structure.

In mentioning the International Council for Adult Education, I want to speak of its founder Dr. Roby Kidd whose tireless

energy and far-sighted vision have been an inspiration to adult educators all over the world. This past summer I read the book about Roby Kidd, entitled, J.R.Kidd: An International Legacy of Learning by Nancy J. Cochrane and Associates. For those who wish to know what international adult education is all about, there is no better book. Roby's life and work make it very clear that while comparative education is part and parcel of international adult education, it is only part of the picture. For international adult education bespeaks an active commitment to action, which goes beyond any efforts to simply compare. Comparison serves its purposes when countries have programs that can be compared, but the vast differences between adult education in small developing countries and highly industrialized countries cries out for something more than comparison. What is needed is a commitment to mutual understanding, adult educators getting together to share their insights and helping each other to solve problems. This is what Roby Kidd knew. He traveled all over the world and wherever he went there would immediately spring up a network of interested folk sharing and learning from each other between and among countries. Unfortunately, we must speak of Roby in the past tense, for he died before we could spare him in 1982.

I would also like to mention another great internationalist who also has left us long before we could spare him, and he is George Aker from Florida. George was, like Roby, a very unassuming man. His interests were always in helping others, setting up networks between his university and especially

countries in Latin America, but also the Far East. We needed him particularly because he opened adult education doors to the South where, we in the United States should be ashamed to admit, we have not done nearly enough. An automobile accident took his life this very year while he was on a consulting trip in Panama. However, again like Roby, his work will continue because he did not work alone, but engaged and trained many persons in the course of his work who will carry on his mission and goals.

There is no time here to try to mention many names of our great internationalists. I must just cite the work of Helena Kekkonen, whose work in peace education for adults won her the UNESCO Peace Prize. She now directs the Peace Education Institute in Finland. And I would like to mention just one more name, that of a man doing a different kind of adult education, but adult education all the same. He is Adolfo Perez Esquivel, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1980. I first became aware of him when he gave a most inspiring address at the World Adult Education Conference in Buenos Aires. Since then I have read what I can find by him, but it is not much because he is a doer not a writer. His unstinted efforts in the cause of justice and human rights through non-violent action speak through the lives of all the people he has educated and influenced--people in all the Latin American countries who have learned that they too can enhance the cause of peace by working for justice through non-violent means. While most of us may not be able to match the efforts of these persons, all our small efforts are needed, in whatever ways we find to play our parts.

And there are many parts to play. In the first place, we need to educate ourselves about adult education internationally through reading, traveling, joining international organizations, providing hospitality for visiting adult educators from other countries, and through working in other countries for longer or shorter periods of time as consultants or with Fulbright Fellowships, etc. Adult educators can arrange personal exchanges on a one-to one basis. Whether we have any immediate plans to travel or not, we should all have at least a second language, even to work in some areas of one's own country. We should make a conscious effort to know the minority ethnic groups in our own countries. World peace cannot be attained until we develop satisfactory relationships among all groups, especially in our own countries.

The necessity of developing an openness to the understanding of other cultures, goes without saying. Such understanding and empathy will be reflected in all our work. We can share it specifically by doing research and writing, and through all the various media possibilities. We should especially think of the great value of personal correspondence with adult educators in other countries, and correspondence with elected officials to apprize them of citizen interests in various kinds of legislation.

There is still another very good way to support international adult education. We can provide financial support for a whole variety of international adult education projects, from large efforts like the International Council for Adult Education and for small projects closer to home, such as taking a

foreign student into our homes, or providing scholarship money for international students.

We should not overlook the international adult education work carried on by our churches and all the non-governmental and volunteer agencies. The list is endless.

I think no one expects the development of international understanding and cooperation to be a bed of roses, or to come quickly and easily. There are too many very deep political, cultural and religious differences. Nevertheless, we are all sailing in this one small ship called Earth. Even when the differences loom so large we may feel helpless, that is no reason to turn away from trying, rather we must face the challenge of learning to reason together. No one needs to be reminded that military solutins are not the answer.

Someone said that life is not like crossing a field where we can see in the distance what the other side is like. Rather we make the field as we go, you and I, for better or for worse. Adult educators have a great responsibility for the creation of that field. Roby Kidd said, "Those who will dare may lead the way to a better world for all."

I put the challenge to all of us to accept this international leadership role. Together we can enhance the quality of life for the peoples of this earth.

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